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BREAKING OPEN THE HEAD

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# BREAKING OPEN

DANIEL PINCHBECK

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MAY 1984

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A psychedelic  
journey into  
the heart of  
contemporary  
shamanism



THE

HEAD



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One must explore deep and believe the incredible to find the new particles of truth, floating in an ocean of insignificance. — J. K. COOPER



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For Laura  
And in memory of my father,  
Peter Fuchsbeck





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## introduction

When I began this book, I wanted to solve a mystery. I wanted to know why certain substances are revered in tribal societies throughout the world but repressed as well as ridiculed in contemporary Western cultures. In the West, these substances are called "psychedelics," a class of drugs that radically alter consciousness and perception. Unlike heroin or cocaine, most psychedelics are neither physically harmful or habit forming. Yet they are considered so frightening and dangerous that possession of them is punished by long prison sentences. Although they were once thought to "expand consciousness," which sounds at least theoretically desirable, no sane adult can be allowed legal access to them.

The word *psychedelic*—"mind-manifesting"—was coined in the 1950s during our culture's brief enthusiasm for chemical self discovery. The term itself is a bit vague, as the entire set of these substances tends to escape precise classification. In this book, I have, for the most part, limited my discussion to traditional and well-known visionary catalysts

including psilocybin-containing mushrooms, peyote, the Amazonian potion ayahuasca, LSD, iboga, and dimethyltryptamine (DMT). I have also looked into a few recent discoveries. To keep my task manageable, I have not discussed marijuana or ecstasy (better described as an "empathogenic"); or ketamine (an anaesthetic inducing out-of-body experiences).

In the mid 1960s, most of the known psychedelics were outlawed, and the mainstream vogue for consciousness expansion ended soon after. In the next decades, the media repeatedly associated psychedelics with blown minds, wasted potential, and social chaos. The notion persists that to dabble in psychedelics, to trip, is to risk madness.

Preserved in pockets of the undeveloped world, shielded from the rapid ravages of modernization by dense jungles or mountains, it is still possible to encounter intact shamanic cultures. Among these people, plants that induce visions are the center of spiritual life and tradition. They believe that these plants are sentient beings, supernatural emissaries. They ascribe their music and medicine, their cosmology and extensive botanical knowledge to the visions given to them in psychedelic trance. For tribes in Africa, Siberia, North and South America, and many other regions, rejection of the visionary knowledge offered by the botanical world would be a form of insanity.

While researching this book, I visited shamans in West Africa, Mexico, and the Ecuadorian Amazon. In Gabon, a small country on the equator, I went through a Bwiti initiation, eating iboga, a psychedelic root bark that induces a trance lasting for thirty hours. Some of the Bwiti call this ceremony "breaking open the head." The bark powder temporarily releases the soul from the body, allowing the initiate entry into the African spiritual cosmos, where he is shown the outline of his fate.

*Breaking Open the Head* follows two tracks. On the one hand, I examine the cultural history of psychedelic compounds in the modern West, looking at the intersection of archaic drugs and modern thinkers leading to the 1960s—a failed mass-cultural voyage of shamanic initiation—and up to the present day. One inspiration is Walter Benjamin, the German Jewish thinker who experimented with hashish and mescaline in the 1920s. Benjamin thought that visionary intoxication, achieved through drugs or other means, could be a "profane illumination," shattering the hypnotic trance of modern life. "The reader, the

thinker, the flaneur, are types of Illuminati just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic," Benjamin wrote. "Not to mention that most terrible drug—ourselves—which we take in solitude."

"That most terrible drug," myself, is the subject of the book's other inquiry. Once upon a time, not so long ago, I was a typical Manhattan atheist, suspicious, cynical, disbelieving in metaphysical possibilities. Due to a tweak in my character, my cynicism increasingly tormented me. Without any higher reason, life seemed unbearable and pointless. Compelled by my despair and self-disgust, I decided to poke at the limits of my disbelief. If not the safest or most legal route, certain chemical catalysts seemed the fastest and most direct means of self-testing whether this reality was all that could be known.

Taking myself as a psychedelic case history, I describe my own trips and crashes through the neurochemical looking glass. *Breaking Open the Head* tells the story of how my own head was broken open, and how I have gingerly tried to put the pieces back together. It is the record of a subjective, incomplete, occasionally harrowing, often alienating, yet exhilarating and fun process of discovery and transformation.

I believe that psychedelic drugs, used carefully, are profound tools for self-exploration. The forbidden substances can be a precision technology for revealing the interstitial processes of thinking, the flickering candle sputters of emotion, the fine-tuned machinery of sense perception. The unfolding of the self through an increase in perception, cognition, and feeling is one level of the trip. On low doses, that is all you get, and often it is enough.

The next level begins where consciousness, suddenly able to go beyond its normal boundaries, bursts open on the nonordinary world. It fascinates me that these two levels are so closely related. It is as if the mind were a rocket, gathering force as it speeds along a runway until it finally lifts into space, beyond the tug of gravity, where all the rules are different. Why should a process that begins by sharpening normal perceptions—making colors brighter, enhancing awareness of patterns in nature—lead seamlessly into "abnormal" perceptions, into paintings that breathe, statues that dance, trees that writhe with faces and limbs? Not to mention, as yet, those geometric and hallucinatory vistas of unleashed Otherness, revealed to the closed eyes.

The visionary power of psychedelics remains a mystery, one that was abandoned by the scientific academy when psychedelics were

made illegal a generation ago. Equally mysterious: Why should the private exploration of one's inner reality, by chemical or other means, be considered a serious threat to a "free society"?

In *The Long Trip*, a study of visionary drug use through history, Paul Devereux muses: "I sometimes wonder if our culture, acting in the manner of a single organism—in the way a crowd of people or a classroom of students sometimes can—somehow senses a deep threat to its own philosophical foundations residing in the psychedelic experience. This might be part account for the otherwise irrational hatred and repression of the use of hallucinogens, and the striking dismissal of the psychedelic experience as a trivial one by so many of our intellectuals."

It is the nature of repression to be invisible. Something that is repressed can't reveal itself to us, can't appear as a break in our awareness—then we would see its workings, and the repression would be dispelled. In a world of information overload and perpetual distraction, repression manifests as a dismissive giggle, a yawn of boredom, a sin of omission.

"Repression is reflexive," notes the literary critic Frederic Jameson, "that is, it aims not only at removing a particular object from consciousness, but also and above all, at doing away with the trace of that removal as well, at repressing the very memory of the intent to repress." For over thirty years, a tremendous force of cultural repression has been exerted on the subject of psychedelics.

And yet it cannot be said that our culture frowns on the use of consciousness-changing substances. Marijuana is forbidden, but alcohol and nicotine—far more destructive drugs—are consumed in mass quantities. While psychedelics are outlawed, 27 million Americans currently take antidepressants such as Zoloft or Prozac. These days, most people are far more suspicious of plant compounds safely ingested by human beings for tens of thousands of years than they are of selective serotonin reuptake inhibitors (SSRIs) or other powerful, utterly synthetic, mood and mind-altering drugs created in the last decades by a pharmacological industry motivated by profit.

Antidepressants fit our society's underlying biases. Psychedelics, emphatically, do not. Is it possible that we have demonized hallucinogens because we fear the contents of our own minds?

When he tried mescaline for the first time, the chemist Sasha



Shulgin found "the world amazed me, in that I saw it as I had when I was a child. I had forgotten the beauty and the magic and the knowirgness of it and me." He realized the tiny amount of white powder he had ingested could not have caused such profound visions. It had only revealed what was inside of him. He understood that "our entire universe is contained in the mind and the spirit. We may choose not to find access to it, we may even deny its existence, but it is indeed there inside us, and there are chemicals that can catalyze its availability."

The nature of consciousness remains a mystery that Western science cannot penetrate. It is not only that our scientists can approach the mind from outside, through descriptions of its functions and logical deductions. There is no means for science, as it is presently constituted, to ask, let alone seek, an answer to the question, Why am I here now? And yet that question forms the basis of an individual's thoughts and perceptions. Of course, I am not saying that psychedelics provide an instant answer to that question, but they offer a different set of lenses through which to look at the problem.

The self-enclosed logic of secular materialism denies any independent existence to the soul, attributing all facets of the human personality to the synaptical wiring of the brain. Psychedelics indicate that this is not the whole story—especially the lightning strike of dimethyltryptamine (DMT), a chemical produced by our own bodies and by many plants. Smoking DMT is like being shot from a cannon into another dimension and returning to this world in less than ten minutes. The DMT revelation strongly suggests that the psyche cannot be reduced to a manifestation of our physical hardware.

Carl Jung wrote: "People will do anything, no matter how absurd, in order to avoid facing their own souls." Is it possible that our society has built up a vast edifice of technology and propaganda in order to avoid that inner confrontation? Enveloped by media and technology, we have come to prefer secondhand images to inner experience—what Jung called "the adventure of the spirit." The self-knowledge achieved through personal discovery and visionary states seems alien, even repellent, compared to the voyeuristic gaze, the virtual entertainments and hypnotic distractions of contemporary culture. Perhaps we are due—even overdue—for a change.

Considering the world's present state of uncertainty, it might seem a strange moment to argue for the validity of controlled shamanic

explorations. The entire subject is fraught with prejudices magnified by decades of propaganda. My hope is that people will reserve judgment while reading this book. They are free to consider it as fiction, or as a slightly laborious thought experiment. I do not advocate or suggest that anyone should violate any law, no matter how poorly conceived, artificial to human nature and dignity, or excessively punitive that law might be. While undertaking this experiment, I have kept in mind a comment by the philosopher Jean-François Lyotard: "Being prepared to receive what thought is not prepared to think is what deserves the name of thinking."

Our society has not been prepared to think seriously about the possibility that plants and even chemicals that transform consciousness might reveal an essential link between the human mind and the natural, and supernatural, world. It may well be the case, as the late Terence McKenna wrote, that "the suppression of the natural human fascination with altered states of consciousness and the present perilous situation of all life on earth are intimately and casually connected." We have pursued frighteningly Faustian knowledge about the physical world without developing deeper awareness of our inner selves. If we don't find some means of correcting this imbalance, we may face the most dire consequences.

Some might consider this book a provocation. It was not meant as one. What took me to Gabon and Ecuador and into the inner recesses of my own psyche was a yearning for meaning and spiritual truth in a world that seemed devoid of both. The study of psychedelic shamanism encompasses a vast number of areas, from botany to chemistry, from cultural history to mysticism. I am an expert in none of them. All I can offer is a record of my own findings—it is, of necessity, incomplete, personal, and highly subjective.

It is, from this vantage point, difficult to conceive that psychedelics might ever receive official sanction, or that the diabolical "War on Drugs" will ever come to an end. But who knows? Above all else, the psychedelic experience continues to reveal, as it did a generation ago, that reality is far more mutable, capacious, and capricious than we generally allow ourselves to imagine.

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# Part One

## MY INITIATION

Whenever there is a reaching down into innermost experience, into the nucleus of the personality, most people are overcome by fear and many run away. The risk of living experience, the adventure of the spirit, can be a case often to most human beings, and the possibility that such experience might have psychological results is anathema to them.

—J. K. Coates, *Memories, Dreams, Reflections*



## Chapter 1

### THE KING OF THE BWITI

"The Bwiti believe that before the ceremony, the neophyte is nothing," Daniel Lieberman told me on my first morning in Gabon, as we took a cab from the Libreville airport. "It is only through the initiation that you become something."

"What do you become?" I asked.

"You become a *bamzi*. One who knows the other world, because you have seen it with your own eyes."

"What do the Bwiti think of iboga?" I asked.

Lieberman barely hesitated. "For them, *iboga* is a super-conscious spiritual entity that guides mankind," he said.

"Okay."

Lieberman, an ethnobotanist from South Africa, wanted to make a business out of taking Westerners through the extreme Bwiti initiation. I had found him on the Internet. On his Website he posted photos from Gabon that seemed unreal: tribal dancers in grass skirts, smiling shamans, and images of *iboga* itself, a modest, even unassuming-looking plant. The Bwiti's botanical sacrament, *Tabernaemontana iboga*, is a bush that grows small, edible orange fruit that are tasteless and sticky. Under optimum conditions, *iboga* can grow into a tree that rises sixty feet high. The hallucinatory compound is concentrated in the plant's

rootbark, which is scraped off, dried, and shredded into gray powder. For an outsider coming from the United States, the Bwiti initiation costs over \$7,000 with plane ticket, the cost of the ritual, and the botanist's fee. "I have spent time in the rain forests of Africa east and west, Madagascar, and the Amazon working with shamans, brujos, witch doctors, healers," Lieberman e-mailed me before the trip. "Iboga I feel to be the one plant that needs to be introduced to the world, and urgently."

In person, the botanist was thin and pallid, wearing Tewa sandals and safari clothes. He seemed younger, less professional, more ill at ease than I had expected. He was an entomologist as well as a botanist—later he would show me hundreds of photographs he had taken of insects in the African rain forest. He seemed the type of person who would be happiest alone, trekking through a forest in search of rare beetles and butterflies. He told me his pale complexion and twitches appeared during a near-fatal bout of cerebral malaria. "I caught it during a Bwiti ceremony," he said. "It took me months to recover."

I expected my guide to be robust and adventurous. Instead, at thirty, he turned out to be two years younger than me, and shakier. He also told me that the last time he took iboga, he had been shown the date of his own death, and it wasn't too far away. From the scribe way he said this, I knew he believed it was true. I didn't press him for details—later I wished that I had.

Libreville was hot, stagnant, without vitality. The city seemed pressed under glass. Blinding sunlight reflected off the black mirrors of corporate towers, the headquarters of oil companies. Because of its oil deposits, Gabon, a small West African country on the equator, is richer, more secure, than other countries in the region. Iboga is another natural resource, but it will never be exploited for export by the Gabonese. Half the population of Gabon belongs to one Bwiti sect or another. Even the president-for-life, Omar Bongo, whose neutral and uninterested visage gazed down at us from posters around town, was known to be an initiate. The Bwiti seem to tolerate foreign interest in their sacred medicine, but they do not encourage it in any way.

"Why would the Bwiti allow me to join their sect?" I now asked.

"Bwiti is like Buddhism," he said. "Anyone can join if they are will-

ing to be initiated. The word *Bwiti* simply means the experience of the iboga plant, which is the essence of love."

While Lieberman equated *Bwiti* with Buddhism, to most observers it remains an enigmatic cult. Some sects of *Bwiti*, such as the *Pang*, incorporate elements of Christianity, even wearing ostentatious costumes that resemble Mardi Gras versions of the vestments of Catholic bishops and nuns. Other groups, such as the one we were visiting, hold on to tribal beliefs. James Fernandez, an anthropologist who studied the sect at length, ended his book *Bwiti: An Ethnography of the Religious Imagination in Africa* inconclusively: "In the end, any attempt to demonstrate the coherence of the *Bwiti* cosmos founders upon the paradoxes with which it plays." For Fernandez, the *Bwiti* religion worked by "indirection and suggestion and other kinds of puzzlements," leaving "many loose ends and inconsistencies." In the text, a typically distanced work of anthropology, there was no indication that Fernandez had tried *iboga* himself.

I knew there was one other customer for this journey. A woman. I had fantasized, in advance, about hooking up with some brave and beautiful Australian heiress or young Peace Corps volunteer. Instead, to my dismay, I was introduced at the hotel to Elaine, a short, talkative, middle-aged Jewish psychoanalyst with a heavy New York accent.

"I just came from Bhutan where I got a terrible bladder infection," the analyst immediately announced. "You're a New Yorker also? What a surprise! I'm a psychoanalyst in the West Village. Maybe you know my friend who works for the *New York Times*? Or my sister, the novelist?"

I nodded at the familiar names, trying to recover from the shock of unwanted familiarity. I had yearned for some severe and pristine pursuit of the sacred, the exotic "Other" encountered in novels of Joseph Conrad or Paul Bowles. Instead, I would be sharing my tribal adventure with a woman I might have tried to avoid at a Manhattan cocktail party. I admired Elaine's courage and her reasons for taking this trip: she said that some of her parents abused drugs, especially coke, and she wanted to know if she should recommend iboga to them. But her presence on my journey seemed like some carefully orchestrated karmic punishment.

We went to meet our shaman, Tsanga Juan Moutamba, who called himself "The King of the *Bwiti*." What we would later discover about

The King's belligerence and greed and tyrannical theatricality was not evident during this first encounter. At his Libreville house, The King seemed gruff but basically friendly as we set the arrangements for the trip. His purple robe, ample stomach, bushy gray beard, and necklace of lion's teeth gave him the larger-than-life presence of a 1960s avant-garde jazz musician. With shy smiles, members of his huge family came to shake hands—we were told by Lieberman that he had eight wives and fourteen children, plus an untold number of Bwiti initiates who called him "Papa." The tribe packed our bags into a jeep, and The King himself drove us down Gabon's single highway, four hours into the dense jungle, while green foliage unfolded monotonously under a lead gray sky. He played a tape of the twangy, unsettling Bwiti music over and over again on his tape recorder as we drove. The music did not sound tribal; to me it had a sci-fi quality. When we stopped at one of the frequent military checkpoints, the guards would take one look at his lion's tooth necklace and wave us past.

During my time in Gabon, I kept trying to find out the meaning of Moutamba's status as "Le Roi du Gabon Bwiti," as the hand-painted sign outside his tribal village proudly proclaimed. I received different answers, sometimes from the same person. Alan Dukaga, an English-speaking Gabonese with a limp, who acted as our translator, first told me: "Moutamba is like Jesus to us. Most of the people now are like lacking roots. They got tied to the Christian ways and forgot their culture. Moutamba is helping to bring back our culture. We hope soon they will start teaching Bwiti again in the schools." A few days later, when relations soured between us and our shaman, Alan reversed himself. "Moutamba?" he scoffed. "He's not the king of anything. He just call himself that."

It was my first time in Africa, the one continent I had never wanted to visit. When I thought of Africa I thought of vast disasters, cruelty on a biblical scale: famines, tribal wars, inescapable poverty, despotic dictatorships, epidemics of AIDS and ebola. It was a continent where friends of mine went to prove themselves—writing journalism, photographing exotic atrocities, acting out Hemingway-esque safari fantasies, joining the Peace Corps, contracting bizarre diseases. The ebola virus first appeared in the forests of Gabon. Sometimes I mused on the unsettling near-homophony of ebola and ihinga.



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